{ See Note at end. }

UNITY

CHURCH-DOOR PULPIT,

FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

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WHY GOD'S CHOSEN ARE

A MINORITY OF THE MINORITY.

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MATH. xxii: 14—"For many are called but few are chosen."

At first sight this would seem a theological saying. And theologians of the *ultra* sort have eagerly seized upon it as a trenchant weapon of battle. Many are called to be Christians, they argue, but few are elected to be saved and the many are reprobated to be damned. It is recorded of the eloquent Massillon that, at the close of a discourse from this text on the fewness of the elect, preached before Louis 14th and the French Court,—so cruel had been the logic and so graphic the picturing of the great orator—the entire audience arose pale and trembling, as if in awed expectancy of hearing then and there the blast of the trumpet of the archangel.

But, if this were the meaning of our Lord, then herein would be solved the problem he once refused even to consider. A certain man, on an occasion, asked him, "Lord, are there few that be saved?" and the Master responded, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate!" Whether there were few or many to be saved was a problem he would not solve. We may be sure that our text is no arithmetical summing up of human chances.

It is more than likely that these words were not even original with Jesus and that they were simply a current proverb into which he saw fit to breathe new meaning. We know that the Greeks had such a saying; and it is quite probable that the Jewish literature, so rich in wise by-words, was not deficient in some such adage. Plato in his Phædo puts into the mouth of Socrates precisely this sent-

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iment of Jesus, though dressed in other garb. That the significance of this quotation may be fully appreciated, it is necessary ere I repeat it to premise; that among the ancients unwonted knowledge was a very dangerous possession and that religious ideas other than those in vogue among the masses sought protection in obscurity. There had arisen, wherever the human mind was active and spiritual, —in Egypt, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, —systems of exoteric and esoteric instruction, that is of truth acknowledged and of truth concealed. Disciples advanced from the outside to the inside of this sacred philosophy by degrees of novitiate and through solemn rites of initiation. Novices by misleading symbols, dark sayings and dramatic ceremonial received only hints of the great revelations made at last in full to the initiated and trained professor. These systems of instruction were called Mysteries. Christ was quite familiar with their existence. Once he likened his teaching to them. "To you," quoth he to his disciples, "it is given to know the Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven." Paul in many places pictured Christianity as a system of mysteries, using in many ways the thought of the quotation from Plato to which we may now return and which elucidates our text. Said Socrates, "I conceive that the founders of these Mysteries had a real meaning and were not mere triflers, when they intimated in a figure long ago, that he who passed uninitiated and unsanctified into the world below will live in a slough, but that he who arrives there after initiation and purification will dwell with the gods; for 'many,' as they say in the Mysteries, 'many are the wand-bearers but few are the mystics,'—meaning, as I interpret the words, the true philosophers."

"Many are the wand-bearers but few are the mystics!"—many novices, few initiated,—many called, few chosen! This contrast is, I am sure, what our Lord had in mind, in the sigh of our text. His idea was that, while the privileges of a religious life were within the reach of all men, comparatively few become keenly appreciative of the honor conferred upon them or eagerly receptive of the blessings their rare opportunity affords. In religion, as in art, science and philosophy, there were many wand-bearers and few mystics, many novices and few initiated, and tone must be given to even the church of God by the minority of the minority. Twice do we find the words of our text and in different connections expressing the sadness of the Master; and I am confident that they breathed a frequent sigh, oft expressing our Lord's dismay over the indifference, mental sluggishness and religious torpor of those who surrounded him.

Oh! so many wise and good men have repeated that sigh during these eighteen centuries! And to-day the old adage holds its own. To-day it is the minority of the minority who in the churches of Christ do the wise thinking, set the best examples and give general character, direction and tone. Still the many are called and few are chosen. The many are content to be saved "hardly" and "so as by fire." The Greek historian, Thucydides, left the incomparable masterpiece of his lifetime, "The Peloponnesian War," unfinished,—broken off in the midst of a sentence. And so many Christians are like that history, unfinished,—broken off in the midst of a sentence,—not to be rejected,—in many respects perhaps admirable, but leaving such vivid impression upon the viewer's mind of falling short.

And what shall be said of those who have not only fallen short, but as well backslidden, who failing of promotion have suffered degradation, the wand-bearers who have lost even their wands? They remind me of Greenland, that region of glacier and the frozen silence of death, the more terrible for its lying name. Ask yourselves if it be not strange that so chill and dreary an arctic region should be called *Green*land. It seems mockery, but in reality is only sad his-

tory. That wild northern region appeared a green land to the Icelandic hero Eric the Red in the 10th century. In the year 1000 a colony was planted on the side of Greenland, with which communication was kept up until the middle of the 15th century, when an arctic current set in and ice increased off the coast; and for four hundred years the civilized world has heard nothing from that fated race. And if we go back and back, we come to a period when—so the rocks tell us—when Greenland was covered with luxuriant vegetation. There were oaks, pines, beeches, planes, chestnuts and even magnolias. The thickets were made up of hazel, sumach, buckthorne, holly and roses: vines and ivies clambered over the trees and rocks: through the ferns and mosses and wild flowers hovered butterflies, while birds sang in the branches and beasts ranged the woods. But now a glacier one mile deep covers the whole land with its winding sheet; and fair Greenland of eld lies dead upon its bier. There are Christians, that once were full of life and growth, whom some arctic current has blockaded, whose growth an arctic glacier has hidden out of sight. A few years of unfaithfulness have done for them what it took ages to do for those ancient groves of the North; and now they are truly "cold as Greenland," and it is the chill of death!

Nay, where are the chosen? Are we not all wand-bearers?

There is preserved to us a curious romance of the Middle Age entitled "The Vision of Brother Alberico," a monk, who in the story is transported by St. Peter to Purgatory, where Christians are undergoing purification. Here amid horrid sights he beheld a great burning river of pitch and above this was hung an iron bridge,—a wonderful bridge, over which all must go and which widened for the virtuous into a commodious pathway, but which, as the worldly and carnal approached, shrivelled into a mere wire, so that as they attempted to cross they fell into the fiery ooze. How many believers to-day would like to test their righteousness by such a bridge as that? Is there one that needs not shed tears of bitter repentance over sins committed, opportunities neglected and privileges spurned?

But how shall we explain this saddening failure? Why are the Chosen a Minority of the Minority?

At the first glance over the problem we might argue: men fail to attain excellence in vital religion and personal character for the same reason that they fail so generally in art, science and philosophy,—attainment is difficult.

Take fine art,—music for instance. We all have musical gifts, which if educated would add vastly to our scope of thought and pleasure of life; and we who are only wand-bearers know well how the initiated revel, nay, go into ecstacy over the divine harmonies of the master. Yet few of us make any effort to share in that lofty joy; and the reason is obvious. We are not musically inclined in any strong controlling tendency; and the cares of life drown those sweet wild voices in the soul, which summon to the conservatory and the concert hall. Necessarily here are many called and few chosen.

Or take painting. We all love color and outline. Our walls at home are hung with pictures. We never miss an opportunity to study and enjoy a collection of masterpieces. One of the rarest treats of the traveler abroad is the new region of design and suggestion, that opens to him in the art galleries of the old world, awakening and cultivating the slumbering taste within. Yet, notwithstanding this keen and universal enjoyment, how few become desirous to handle the brush themselves. Manifestly it is too difficult; and then were we all painters we should all starve to death. There must needs be many wand-bearers here, if there are to be any mystics at all. Necessarily many are called and few are chosen.

And so of science and of philosophy. These pursuits offer great inducements,

furnishing the rarest privileges and the most elevating joys. Yet we cannot all be scientists and philosophers. The many must bear the wands and only the few shall go in to become adepts in the mysteries of life and thought.

Now will we say the same of religion and character? Will we argue: many are called to piety and few are chosen because it is difficult to be anything more than a novice, and impossible for all to be initiated? Surely the analogy holds up to a certain point. For it is, beyond all denial, very difficult to attain unto a life of devoted piety. An earnest religious walk cuts across all the natural impulses and probabilities of human character.

Consider for a moment the hardship of a godly life. To be a chosen one, mind, will and heart must be consecrate. The mind must have been drilled up to that degree of spirituality which discerns things unseen and eternal. The will, once wayward, stubborn and selfish, must bow to God's will, purpose His desire and accomplish His Law. It would seem as though no art and no science were so difficult of attainment and so needful of endless training as to become holy in character. It would seem as though, if true anywhere, the proverb of Jesus must needs hold here; and that not even the Master ought to complain, if while many are called only few are chosen.

But the analogy holds only so far. A religious life, while clearly difficult for all, is not impossible for any. Two facts utterly separate religious growth from self-training in all arts and sciences, and the wordly-minded are deprived entirely of their seemingly good excuse.

The first fact is, that in religious growth the soul has supernatural help. The musician and the painter has his genius and his industry: the man of God has, in addition to all earthly advantages, the Holy Spirit. Doubtless there is, in some gifted natures, an inspiration of art and an inspiration of science; but neither compares for intensity with that inbreathing of the Divine Spirit, which is available to the least gifted seeker of righteousness. In the parable of the Wedding Feast, which made occasion for use of the proverb we are commenting on, it appears that the guests were from the highways and hence unfit to enter the king's presence, and rendered presentable by the generous supply from the royal wardrobe of appropriate vesture. This indeed was the significant part of the parable. The unworthy guest was rebuked and cast out not because he had not on what he could not possibly have obtained, but because he spurned the bounty of the king, refusing what was freely offered. The difficulty in becoming and remaining a genuine Christian is not in the verb "can" but in the verb "will." Indeed, difficulty is no real barrier at all and to the earnest nature only stimulates ambition. To plead the rigors of a religious life, in excuse of its absence, is more than proof of disinclination,—it is an insult to divine grace. Of those who have had the light, no man, no woman, no child ever failed of exalted righteousness through anything but wilful disinclination.

The second fact, which renders an analogy between religious attainment and skill in art or science unfair and misleading, is that, religiously considered, we are under obligation. We have perfect right to decline the invitation of music or painting, geology or anatomy, poetry or philosophy,—inclination may forbid or circumstances render quite impossible,—and no one would dream of blaming; but it is wrong for us to decline the Gift of God or to make excuse from a life of integrity, devoutness and spirituality. Here an oughtness rests upon us; and if we fail of noble aims and desirable attainments we are gravely blameworthy. The failure is shameful. Just at this point, righteousness rises infinitely above all human pursuits. It is doubtless a wonderful thing, when God has put into a human soul a desire to utter beautiful thought in rhythm of sound or of metre or to discern the remote past in the rocks, or from a few musty records to recon-

struct history; but far more wonderful is that imperative voice in the Soul, which says not "you had better aspire" but "thou *shalt* love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and strength and thou *shalt* love thy neighbor as thyself." There is to me something very wonderful and awful about that Hand of God, which rests so lightly and yet so heavily upon every one of us,—that commands yet compels not. When God says, "Let there be light," the light must needs come, the necessity of it is irresistible. But when God says: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, he addresses not dead forces, but living, responsible souls and there is only the compulsion of obligation: they may and they may not heed. Yet every creature at last shall give account and receive award. This our manhood, upon which God throws us, is our fearful responsibility, the fatal gift of our human destiny; and in its use all other earthly exercise of talent is dwarfed in comparison. Thus it is that to fail of grace or having grace to fail of growth in it, is to fail shamefully. The man who writes a silly poem or the miss who plays detestably upon her piano may justly receive our smile of pity or our look of annoyance; but the man or the woman, who, called of God, lingers in ignorance and in worldly-mindedness is most gravely at fault. No sensitive and healthfully conscientious nature can thus fail without guilt and desert of punishment. To thus fail is to sin against inspiration, against aspiration and against privilege. To thus fail is to transgress against your own souls.

O, ye wand-bearers, I blame you not for being ignorant, but for being willing to remain ignorant; I blame you not for being weak, unworthy and worldly-minded, but for being so content to remain thus far from the Master! It is no disgrace for you to be novices, if you aspire to be something better. You have not attained and never will quite do so in this life, and even Paul acknowledged himself to have fallen short; but Paul ever pressed forward toward the mark, and so ought you. Some one, whom you know, may be very inferior to yourself in knowledge of divine things and in spirituality; and yet if he be growing in grace, he is a better Christian than yourself, if you be content to stand still.

You say, perhaps, that the chosen are few and that you cannot hope to push in among them. Yes, few, but no arbitrary aristocracy. Remember that you are called. There is no respect of persons with God. What the few are, you may be if you will. God's elect are whosoever will! Divine mercy has called you; Divine power will perfect you! It is hard thus to work out your own salvation; but it is God worketh in you, to will and to do, of His good pleasure. Let the majority do as they will and reap their own reward: be thou, O man of God, of the minority of the minority.

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